



**STATUS: HIGH
CONSERVATION
PRIORITY IN IOWA**

Veery *Catharus fuscescens*

Introduction

A shy, tawny colored thrush with a beautiful song that cascades through the deep woods on its breeding grounds in the U.S. and Canada, the Veery was once a familiar sound in parts of Iowa. But the species is apparently disappearing from many of the habitats where it was once more numerous.

This Neotropical migrant crosses the Gulf of Mexico in spring and fall, and breeds in damp, early-succession, deciduous forests, often near streamside thickets or swamps. The Veery's distinctive song prevails at dusk, and this species can distinguish between the vocalizations of neighbors and strangers, reacting aggressively when the latter intrude on a territory.



Habitat Preferences

Generally, Veery will inhabit damp, deciduous forests, and seem to have a strong preference for habitats that are near water. Its breeding range overlaps that of the Wood Thrush, but Veery generally choose wetter, younger woodlands. Some research indicates that this species prefers disturbed forest, probably because a denser understory is not found in undisturbed forests.

In mature woodlands, moisture regime is the chief factor in habitat selection, and is more than twice as important as herb cover. Shrub cover is another chief vegetative consideration in habitat selection – probably because shrubs and abundant understory vegetation provide safe nest sites and feeding sites.

Veeries are area-sensitive breeders, requiring large woodlands for successful nesting. Research has indicated that they seldom nest in woodlands of less than 250 acres in size. They are also very susceptible to nest parasitism by cowbirds – which is exasperated by the fragmentation of woodlands into smaller and smaller units. Therefore woodland fragmentation is a direct cause of serious problems for this species of high conservation priority. Like other deep-woods species, Veeries are especially susceptible to habitat loss.

Feeding Habits

Veery may forage in trees and shrubs, but is primarily a ground forager. Food is approximately 60% insects and 40% fruit during the breeding season, and the percentages may reverse in late summer and fall.

The insects eaten during the nesting season include: beetles, ants, small wasps, caterpillars, and crickets. And spiders, centipedes and snails may also be

consumed. Salamanders and small frogs are rarely eaten.

Breeding Biology

Veeries arrive in Iowa in early May, and males arrive first. Males defend a nesting territory by singing, and courtship involves the male chasing the female, and both birds calling back and forth. Nest building is by the female, and begins from mid-May to early June. The nest is typically placed on or near the ground in dense woodland. The nests that are off the ground are less than 5 feet high.

The average number of eggs that are laid is 4, and the range is from 3 to 5. Incubation lasts about 10 to 14 days, and apparently is by the female only. The female might spend much time brooding the nestlings at first, and both parents feed the young. The young leave the nest at about 10 to 12 days of age; and some pairs may raise two broods in a nesting season.

The Brown-headed Cowbird is a significant brood parasite on Veeries that reduces annual productivity, but to an extent that is not yet fully known.

Concerns and Limiting Factors

Collisions with human-made objects such as TV and radio towers, and perhaps cell phone towers and other structures, during nocturnal migrations, is a serious problem. But elimination of preferred woodland habitats in both breeding and wintering habitats is likely a major reason for declining Veery populations.

Fragmentation of woodlands into smaller and smaller units, and loss of second-growth in woodlands are major threats to Veery populations. Fragmentation increases likelihood of nest parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbird. Increased browsing of understory by growing populations of White-tailed Deer is likely a problem for nesting Veery in many areas.

Several questions about the breeding biology of this species remain unanswered. Perhaps most importantly, the location where most Veeries over-winter still remains largely unknown.

Habitat Management Recommendations

Woodland management practices that leave large tracts of mature forest undisturbed is probably necessary if this species is to survive as a breeding bird in Iowa.

As sound woodland management practices are planned and implemented more frequently across our state, and more attention is given to IBA Criteria Species, the Veery will hopefully be able to sustain or even increase its population. Consequently, development and implementation of conservation plans at IBAs and at other woodland habitats that support, or have the potential to support Verries, is a worthwhile goal.

For general information see Woodland Management for Birds, and for more specific details see Recommended Woodland Management Practices. Both of these sections are in Part 3.